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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 002797

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/29/2026  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [IR](#)  
SUBJECT: LARSEN ON ANNAN'S TRIP: MICRO PICTURE GOOD; MACRO  
PICTURE "HORRIFYING"

REF: BEIRUT 2717

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (S/NF) On 8/29, UN envoy Terje Roed-Larsen briefed the Ambassador on UNSYG Kofi Annan's Beirut meetings the previous day. Annan, according to Larsen, made headway with PM Siniora on direct consultations between the Israelis and Lebanese, but only in the context of the 1949 Armistice Agreement -- a context Larsen noted would be a hard sell in Israel. Siniora also accepted Annan's invitation to a meeting Annan would set up with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, probably in Cyprus; Larsen expected Asad to reject the invitation. Annan "ad-libbed," Larsen said, in saying that the UN can play a role in the exchange of Lebanese prisoners and the kidnapped Israeli soldiers. Given that Israel will "hate" UN involvement, Larsen did not expect any developments in that regard. Annan, according to Larsen, did not push very hard for a UNIFIL role along the Syrian-Lebanese border, because DPKO U/SYG Guehenno is opposed. Speaking more generally, Larsen said that, while the "micro picture" inside Lebanon looks promising, the "macro picture" in the region is "horrifying." Larsen also described the protests against the UN (and especially against Larsen personally) when Annan made a visit to the southern suburbs as a set up, which he blamed on Geir Pedersen succumbing to bad advice from his staff. Finally, Larsen expressed bewilderment about UN thinking on changing its structure to deal with Lebanon just before Kofi Annan leaves office. Better, Larsen said, to wait for the new team in UN headquarters before fiddling with the Lebanon portfolio. End summary.

U.S. BLAMED EVERYWHERE  
FOR SEA AND AIR BLOCKADE

2. (S/NF) Larsen said that, generally, Annan's Beirut meetings were good. But they were overshadowed by the issue of the continued air and sea blockade, "which came up everywhere. You are being blamed," Larsen said, referring to the United States; "everyone except you says it's time to open the airport." Larsen said that Annan promised to raise the issue in Israel. Larsen advised that, for the United States, "this is a losing issue for you, in Lebanon and in the region."

KOFI "DITHERING" ON BORDER ISSUE,

13. (S/NF) Reminded by the Ambassador that this issue is linked to obligations on border control, Larsen said that Annan did not push very hard for a UNIFIL presence along the Syrian-Lebanese border. "Kofi is dithering" on this issue, Larsen revealed, because DPKO U/SYG Jean-Marie Guehenno is "violently opposed" to any UN presence on the Syrian-Lebanese border. "This is a very delicate issue inside the UN," Larsen added; "Guehenno prefers having Syria control Lebanon again." Nevertheless, Larsen felt that this issue was "generally moving in the right direction." Siniora is the "most conservative," Larsen said, but he is willing to be very flexible regarding the German role. Defense Minister Murr told Annan that Germans in uniforms "but without weapons" could be stationed, ostensibly as trainers, in border posts. The Ambassador noted that Germany may have force protection concerns to take into account. Larsen agreed but expressed optimism that a "training and technical assistance mission" can be defined creatively. The Ambassador asked whether Siniora has absorbed the fact that any German assistance will be extended as Germany's contribution to UNIFIL, not as a strictly bilateral issue. Siniora, Larsen said, now understands that the Germans will come only "with UN hats."

ENCOURAGING GOL-GOI DISCUSSIONS,  
BUT SINIORA CITES ARMISTICE AGREEMENT

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14. (S/NF) Besides discussions on the border issues, Larsen reported that Annan came with two proposals. First, he asked Siniora to authorize the UN to begin direct Lebanese-Israeli

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contacts on broader issues, moving beyond the operational coordination meetings held under UNIFIL auspices. Siniora eventually agreed that the military commanders (Michel Sleiman on the Lebanese side) could meet, and "he didn't entirely reject" the possibility of going up a notch (i.e., defense ministers) later. Larsen acknowledged that his idea would be to go up a level beyond that as soon as possible, e.g., to establish contacts between the prime ministers.

15. (S/NF) But Siniora specified that he could only sell these contacts inside Lebanon if he is able to use the context of the 1949 Armistice Agreement, which established a Mixed Armistice Commission. The Armistice Agreement provided the cover and the justification for these contacts, Siniora insisted. Larsen acknowledged that this is a fairly large stumbling block with the Israelis, who consider the Armistice Agreement null and void and have expressed hostility to it. Larsen expressed hope that some way could be found to make the Israelis see the benefits to some kind of creative use of the Armistice Agreement.

SINIORA SAYS YES TO ANNAN-BROKERED  
MEETING WITH BASHAR AL-ASAD

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16. (S/NF) Annan's second proposal, according to Larsen, was a three-way meeting between Annan, Siniora, and Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. Annan would issue the invitations, probably for a meeting to be held in Cyprus, to discuss a whole range of issues, from Syrian support in ending arms smuggling to border demarcation. Siniora, while "he didn't overwhelm us with enthusiasm," accepted Annan's proposal. Larsen said that he did not expect Bashar would accept -- and Bashar's rejection, Larsen said, will be useful to "remind everyone" who Bashar is.

EXCHANGING ISRAELIS AND LEBANESE:  
KOFI RAISES IT, BERRI WANTS NO PART

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17. (S/NF) Annan also "ad-libbed," Larsen said, in raising the issue of Lebanese prisoners and the kidnapped Israeli soldiers. It was the "one point" when Annan went beyond his talking points, in offering to see if the UN could play a helpful role. While insisting forcefully (and also publicly) for the immediate release of the Israeli soldiers, Annan also offered to be a "deal maker." Of course the Lebanese loved the idea, Larsen said, adding that he did not expect any UN role to be acceptable to the Israelis. The Israelis, Larsen said, "will hate the idea." Larsen said that he thought the only way to move into a discussion on exchanges of detainees was to do it "quietly," away from the UN, and with trusted intermediaries like the Germans. "Kofi should have insisted on the release of the Israelis and left it at that."

18. (S/NF) Larsen described Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri as generally positive and constructive in his outlook, with positions more or less in line with those of Siniora. The one exception, Larsen said, was regarding the possibility of exchanging the kidnapped Israelis and imprisoned Lebanese: "Berri wanted nothing to do with it," Larsen said, describing that as a significant change from Berri's previous position of "cease-fire plus prisoner exchanges." That means, in Larsen's analysis, that Berri "sees no solution and therefore does not want to involve himself." One has to ask, Larsen said, whether Hizballah will want to proceed in favor of an exchange. Any victories they could claim would be short-lived, while one of the key pretexts to Hizballah's arms would be removed.

ANNAN ALSO MET WITH SECURITY CHIEFS,  
HARIRI, CABINET, AND HIZBALLAH'S FNEISH  
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19. (S/NF) Larsen noted that Annan had also met with Lebanon's security coordination team: Siniora, Murr, Acting Interior Minister Ahmad Fatfat, LAF Commander Sleiman, ISF Commander Ashraf Rifi, Military Intelligence chief Georges Khoury, and others. UNIFIL Commander Pellegrini, Larsen said, did the same thing he had during Larsen's trip ten days earlier (reftel). Pellegrini, meeting with Annan before the meeting, complained that the LAF was too secretive. Once the large meeting began and Pellegrini was asked to speak, he described excellent cooperation. Pellegrini, Larsen concluded, "doesn't have the guts to say what he thinks."

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Pellegrini is awed in the face of authority, a "fundamental weakness" which Larsen described as being "typical" for Pellegrini's background -- French military.

110. (S/NF) Touching briefing on Annan's other meetings, Larsen said that the session with the entire Lebanese cabinet was "boring," with ministers saying "nonsensical things." Nevertheless, Larsen noted, it was symbolically important for Annan to be seen with the whole cabinet. MP Saad Hariri was "predictable," Larsen commented, without further elaboration.

As for Annan's much-publicized meeting with Hizballah Minister Mohammed Fneish, Larsen complained that Annan was cornered into something that the UNSYG had not agreed upon. While Annan had concurred with a brief pull-aside conversation with Fneish on the margins of the cabinet meeting as a way of checking the Hizballah box without meeting anyone in the Hizballah leadership, in the end Fneish had set up a separate meeting room in the Grand Serail. Before Larsen could object, Geir Pedersen had escorted Annan to the meeting. Larsen was pointedly excluded. (We will see Pedersen later today for a read-out. The Iranian-funded Al-Akhbar newspaper has an account today, but we do not know the accuracy of it.)

ILL-ADVISED SOUTHERN SUBURBS TRIP: A SET UP  
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111. (S/NF) The Ambassador told Larsen that the media coverage of Annan's trip to Beirut's southern suburbs -- in

which the UN was booed, anti-American posters waved, and Larsen pelted with stones -- reinforced his view that Annan had been spectacularly ill-advised in going on a sight-seeing trip during what was supposed to be a serious diplomatic mission. Larsen concurred, saying that "we were set up." Everything was orchestrated, Larsen said, including the fact that the motorcade stopped by one of the many prominent "Made in America" signs posted on destroyed buildings and bridges. Larsen said that he felt in physical danger, as his name was chanted along with U.S.-related themes and stones thrown in his direction only.

¶12. (S/NF) Explaining how Annan ended up there, Larsen said that Geir Pedersen had succumbed to a recommendation from Imran Riza on his staff. Although Riza was site officer for the visit and therefore in the suburbs for a full 90 minutes before Annan arrived, he did not cancel the trip even when it became clear from the posters and crowd and insufficient security that an incident was in the making. In a separate conversation with the Ambassador, Salman Shaikh from Pedersen's office expressed disgust, saying that Pedersen had disregarded his advice in dropping the suburbs in favor of Riza's insistence on going. (We note that Shaikh and Riza -- who despise one another -- often give Pedersen polar-opposite advice, with Riza leaning toward a Hizballah view and Shaikh in favor of March 14.)

UN DYNAMICS: WHY CHANGE STRUCTURES  
ONLY WEEKS BEFORE KOFI ANNAN LEAVES?

¶13. (S/NF) Uncharacteristically, Larsen spent only a few minutes on internal UN matters. He said that he found it "crazy" that the UN Secretariat was currently thinking about appointing a Special Representative for Lebanon, only "weeks" before Kofi Annan leaves office. Why, Larsen said, would a lame duck Secretary General be fiddling with structures now. It would be far better to stick with the current line-up until the new Secretary General feels comfortable in putting his own team in place. Moreover, Larsen said, the UN is looking at Sunni candidates for the SRSG position, which means that the person will not be trusted by the Shia. While Larsen was deeply annoyed with Pedersen for the "debacle" in the southern suburbs and the upgraded Fneish meeting, Larsen still believed that, politically, it was better to keep Pedersen the senior UN political advisor on the ground. Pedersen at least has the experience with and understanding of the Israeli positions, Larsen noted.

MICRO PICTURES GOOD;  
MACRO PICTURE "HORRIFYING"

¶14. (S/NF) In closing, Larsen said that he was impressed with improvements in the "micro picture" even since he recent visit (reftel). The LAF deployment to the south and to the

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Syrian border is "very good news." Siniora has managed to keep the cabinet together and even won cabinet approval for steps that would have been unthinkable until recently. Enhanced UNIFIL is finally coming together. But the macro picture, Larsen said, "is horrifying." Tehran and Damasus "won't play along; all signs are bad." Iran is moving the wrong way on its nuclear program. Asad's speech is an "ominous signal of what's to come." Larsen made references, too, to reports that have been circulating in Lebanon about TNT being smuggled across the Lebanese-Syrian border. While some has been seized by the LAF, "presumably some got through," Larsen said, noting that TNT is not something that will be used against the Israelis.

¶15. (S/NF) "The SYG is upbeat, euphoric," Larsen concluded, "but I am deeply, deeply pessimistic. The problem is not Siniora's weakness or lack of resolve. The problem is in Damascus and Tehran." Larsen noted that, after a stop in

Naqoura today, Annan would travel to Israel (where he will also pay a visit to victims of the conflict, to "balance" the visuals of the southern suburb excursion), then on to Amman, Damascus, Tehran, Jeddah, Cairo, Doha, Istanbul, and Madrid. Larsen expected that he will encounter protests in Damascus and Tehran. According to Larsen, the UN delegation will be back in New York on September 7, with Annan heading out soon after to the NAM summit in Cuba. UNGA begins after that. So this trip, Larsen claimed, is essentially Annan's last engagement with the Middle East.

FELTMAN